

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY THE RETURNING OFFICER and ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICER

TO:	COUNCIL		
DATE:	23rd FEBRUARY 2022		
TITLE:	POLLING DISTRICT BOUNDARIES		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLORS JASON BROCK TONY PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP
SERVICE:	ELECTORAL REGISTRATION	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To consider and approve the boundaries of revised polling districts within each ward necessitated by the changes in ward boundaries brought about by the results of the Local Government Ward Boundary Review the results of which were reported to Policy Committee on the 14th December 2020. Plans showing the boundaries of revised individual polling districts are attached to this report.
- 1.2 To consider and approve the proposed polling places for each of the polling districts.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That the polling districts shown on the plan marked "Reading Borough Council Polling Districts 2022" be approved.
- 2.2 That the polling places for each of the polling districts referred to in recommendation 2.1 above be designated as listed in the appendix to this report.
- 2.3 That the Returning Officer be authorised to make changes to polling places in urgent circumstances where doing so would be necessary to protect the integrity of an election and/or electoral arrangements.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 It is the Council's policy to encourage residents to involve themselves in the democratic processes and the proposals in this report are aimed at providing

voters with places to vote, which are as convenient as possible within the resources available to the Council.

- 3.2 However, if any voter is unable to reach the correct designated polling place, s/he is entitled to have a postal vote on demand provided an application for such a vote is made within the statutory time limit for the election in question.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 The various changes to the ward boundaries brought about by the Review carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) necessitated a review of the polling district boundaries within each ward.
- 4.2 The proposals shown on the plan marked Reading Borough Council Polling Districts 2022 were drawn up with two particular objectives in mind - the first being to try and maintain as many of the existing boundaries as possible to enable people to vote at their existing polling station but, secondly to ensure that where changes were necessary voters had reasonable access to a nearby polling place.
- 4.3 The proposals regarding Redlands Ward makes provision for a polling station within the University in Park lounge near to the Windsor Hall in the Park Group. This polling station is to facilitate the University Halls of Residence. Please note the Redlands ward plan which shows the 3 areas which contain Halls of Residence that make up one District. I propose 5 Districts and therefore 5 polling places in Redlands Ward in total.
- 4.4 The proposals regarding the new district boundaries were considered and agreed by the Boundary Review Cross Party Working Group on 3rd February 2022.
- 4.5 There are four polling districts with boundaries, which have been drawn in such a way as to ensure that the voters within those areas will form part of their correct Parliamentary Constituency. The law requires that each Parliamentary Constituency is divided into polling districts and, wherever possible, those polling districts also form the polling districts for local elections. However, because of the boundary changes brought about by the Ward Review there are four areas which now form part of different wards outside the current Parliamentary Constituency boundaries. This will no doubt, be regularised when the results of the Parliamentary Constituency Review are brought into effect in due course.
- 4.6 The four areas concerned are polling district AD in Abbey Ward, polling district EC in Church Ward, polling district HC in Katesgrove Ward, and polling district PD in Whitley Ward.
- 4.7 There are seven polling places on the list in the appendix that are not currently used. These are Kennet Island Community Centre, 100 Longwater Avenue both in Whitley Ward, Caversham Library in Caversham Ward, Central Library in Abbey Ward, YMCA Parkside Road in Southcote Ward, Mapledurham Pavilion in Caversham Heights Ward, and Park Lounge which is situated near to Windsor Hall in the centre of Park Group in Redlands Ward. I have inspected the above venues and consider that they are satisfactory in terms of access and will provide suitable polling places. In addition I propose to locate a

polling station at the new community facility at the site of the Norcot Community Centre at Lyndhurst Road

- 4.8 I have consulted with the ward Councillors regarding the proposed new polling places in the above wards. The responses received have in the main been positive in respect of the proposals. The responses received from ward Councillors are as follows:

Caversham Ward

Proposed Polling station at Caversham Library.

Cllr Carnell

“Whilst I understand the position of Caversham Primary School, and support their being able to make their own decision, it concerns me that the residents of the part of the existing Thames ward who fall into the new Caversham ward would be put off by the journey and parking. Church road is often very busy and could act as a deterrent”.

Cllr Barnett Ward

“Thank you for this. As you may remember, I have lobbied you in the past for the polling station to be removed from Caversham Primary so I am very pleased to see this proposal (and I'm sure the school will be too)”.

Redlands Ward

Proposed New Polling Station at the University

Park Lounge which is situated by the side of Windsor Hall in the centre of Park Group.

Cllr White

“If I have read the email correctly that means there will be five polling places for Redlands Ward:

St Luke's Church Hall - heavily used

Hexham Road community Centre - quiet

Museum of English rural life - quiet

Wesley Church Hall - I would guess this would be an average level of busy

Park Lounge - I would guess this would be quiet as turnout amongst students is normally quite low

From my election day experience and guesswork I would assume that three of these polling stations would be very quiet. I would have thought it would be better to have less but busier polling places (easier for the council to promote and staff). Park Ward has two polling places for example and this works fine. I would have thought that the enlarged Redlands Ward could manage with less polling stations.

Can you send through your latest draft of the polling districts map? And the number of voters and postal voters in each polling district.”

Cllr McElroy

“Ultimately I will defer to your expert judgement, but as a principle, I support anything that makes it easier for people to vote. The comments below are just intended as food for thought.

Either way, thanks for keeping us informed.

- Great to make it easier for students though I wonder if the low level of registered electors in halls of residence might mean that the resource needed to have that extra polling station might not be spent more cost effectively elsewhere. Especially if it causes confusion for Wokingham electors.
- Are you proposing that those who last year voted in St Luke’s Church (previously Redlands Primary School) would all be voting in St Luke’s Church Hall? If so, I would be concerned about the capacity of the Church Hall to process that many electors, since I think those two are the busiest polling stations in Redlands.
- Wesley Church Hall would be right on the boundary of Redlands ward, and alongside MERL and St Luke’s would heavily concentrate the polling stations in that wing of the ward. Is it possible to see where the boundaries for the polling stations would be?
- I assume St Joseph’s, St William church and the Alexandra Road mosque have been ruled out as options?”

Whitley Ward

Cllr Leng

Proposed Polling Stations at Kennet Island Community Centre and 100 Longwater Avenue.

“Good to read Kennet Island polling station is feasible (priority they’ve waited a while for their own polling station)

Really don’t want to use the Christ the King again (notable drop off in turnout, people don’t like change) Important to try & get an Exbourne Rd option
Green Park option good (Fair few postal voters there)”

4.9 I propose to carry out a comprehensive public UK Parliamentary Polling districts and polling places review after the May 2022 local elections.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The ward boundary review goes to the heart of promoting local democracy and electoral equality for local residents. It supports the promotion of the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

6.1 The LGBCE undertook two public consultations in carrying out the ward boundary review.

- 6.2 It will be necessary to ensure that voters are given adequate information about changes in their voting arrangements where polling places have changed as a result of these proposals. Voters will be alerted by means of the poll card but extra publicity will be made through the website and at libraries and other appropriate Council buildings.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 7.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 7.2 In this regard you **must** consider whether the decision will or could have a differential impact on: racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief.

7.3 Access

A significant element of the review of a polling place is to consider the suitability of the polling stations in terms of access. Section 16 of the Electoral Administration Act 2006 has amended Section 18D of the Representation of the People Act 1983 Act to require the authority to take sufficient account of the accessibility of disabled persons to polling stations (S18(2)(b)).

- 7.4 I have consulted with the Council's Access Officer Helen Bryant in respect of the proposed new polling places. I have satisfactorily answered all the queries raised by the Access Officer in respect of the new polling places.
- 7.5 The view of my Polling Station Inspectors and myself is that all of the polling places that were used in May 2021 are wheelchair accessible, either directly or through discrete arrangements made at the venue. In some cases there can be a long distance from the road to the room used as the polling station.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 8.1 There are no environmental concerns as a result of the implementation of the LGBCE Final Recommendations.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1983 require that every Parliamentary Constituency must be divided into polling districts and that each district Council must divide its area into polling districts for that part of the Constituency within its area. Reading falls within the area of two Parliamentary Constituencies - Reading East and Reading West. I am the Returning Officer for both constituencies.

- 9.2 In exercising its powers, the Council is required to give all electors “such reasonable facilities for voting as are practicable in the circumstances”. In addition, in choosing polling places, only places which are accessible to electors who are disabled must be chosen so far as is reasonably and practicable.
- 9.3 Unless there are special circumstances, the polling place for any polling district should be located in the district itself.
- 9.4 A polling place is usually the building to which people go to vote and polling stations are the locations within the building at which electors obtain their voting papers.
- 9.5 The Returning Officer is required to provide a sufficient number of polling stations in each polling place and to allocate electors to the polling stations in such manner as he or she thinks most convenient. There is now a total of 21,949 postal voters, 101 proxy voters in local elections in Reading. The changes to polling places focus on the remaining 96,214 electors who are not postal voters and will need to vote in person at their local polling station.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 It is considered that there should not be any significant change in the cost of hiring polling places albeit the number of polling places is to increase from 48 in May 2021 to 53 in May 2022. The Council’s spend on hiring its 48 polling places in May 2021 was £25,106. The cost of staffing and equipping polling stations depends more on the type of election than the location. It must be noted that that in response to the Covid Pandemic I have increased the number of staff at Polling Stations materially.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 Policy Committee Report 14th December 2020

